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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT GUELLEH REVIEWS FIVE YEARS IN OFFICE

1. (U) SUMMARY: To commemorate the fifth anniversary of his election April 9, 1999 President Guelleh held a press conference with local journalists (not the opposition) April 7 to outline what he described as his accomplishments. He began with a short speech and answered questions for more than an hour. Guelleh's assessment of his time in office was positive, naming restoring peace as his greatest accomplishment. He also expressed his desire to create an economic market that would attract foreign direct investment. On a regional level, Guelleh said the Government of Djibouti hopes for a peaceful resolution to the Somalia issue and considers overall relations with neighboring countries good. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) On the fifth anniversary of his election as President of Djibouti, Ismail Omar Guelleh highlighted the accomplishments of his administration in the areas of equality and social justice, public education, battling social vices, and what it means to be Djiboutian. He commented that five years ago he asked the Djiboutian people to "accompany me in the task of creating a society founded on our spiritual and cultural components." Guelleh also addressed the idea of independence, saying "Independence is more than an act of separation from the ancient colonial power. It is above all the rescue of the self-respect, of the dignity of the Djiboutian people who exercise their liberty. But independence is a process that continues every day. It is the manner in which the Djiboutians exist in the world and in all of life."

3. (U) Questions to Guelleh from the press focused on whether Guelleh felt he had fully accomplished his goals politically and economically. Guelleh commented that he believed he had "restored peace to the hearts of our citizens. Peace has been my best success. I believe I have responded to the appeals of the most disadvantaged of our population. The respect of man has been at the center of our strategy." (Note: Guelleh refers to the final peace treaty ending the civil war signed in 2001. End Note) Guelleh emphasized that his administration has put social sector needs first, as a base for development of the country, highlighting education, health, the role of women, habitat and water as the most important areas. Guelleh reminded the audience that "to transform or construct a country takes generations...but I think I have modestly contributed to the rebuilding of our nation."

4. (U) On the growth of the economy and whether it would foster sustainable development, Guelleh said the government has started to reduce the cost of living by bringing the scales of internal taxes on consumption down from 33 percent to 8 percent. The next step is to rehabilitate the infrastructure of the country by engaging the workforce in professional training. "We commit ourselves" Guelleh continued "to creating the conditions necessary to attract foreign direct investment. But the road is long and the difficulties remain with the recent price of oil." Guelleh commented that despite these difficulties the economy was promising, a rise in youth employment statistics had been reported and for the first time Djibouti's growth rate surpassed its birth rate. Guelleh detailed the efforts that the government has made, emphasizing stabilization of public finances, reducing debt and the deficit, and a research program for less costly and renewable energy.

5. (U) On the issue of corruption and reforms, Guelleh refuted the idea that corruption has gained the most ground, saying "It is a question of education in my opinion...If the directors don't speak, don't teach, don't educate the people, the spread of corruption risks becoming dangerous for the society and for the country as well as the people who risk the loss of their soul." Guelleh also commented that "It is us that need the reforms more than the World Bank or the IMF. It is us that need structure and discipline. These reforms are strong and difficult. But we have passed the most difficult point." Guelleh went on to say the IMF Staff Monitored Program negotiated this

spring would be good for the country and the Poverty Reduction Strategy was finally ready for review and decision of the administrative council at the World Bank.

16. (U) Guelleh wrapped up the interview by addressing the Somalia issue, saying "We would like that the Somali people and their representatives have a chance to talk amongst themselves. We recommend that the international community be ready to help the Somali people rebuild their country." In response to questions concerning how Djibouti's Somalia policy has affected relations with Ethiopia, Guelleh commented the two countries are "linked by blood and history. The economy further ties us together," and that the two countries are compelled to work for the good of both countries. Guelleh paralleled relations with Somaliland to relations with Ethiopia saying, "I am obliged to facilitate life for our fellow citizens on both sides. The question of sovereignty or non-sovereignty does not concern us. It concerns the people of the country that must regulate their own affairs with their brothers."

RAGSDALE